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SUBJECT: SERBIA ARRESTS ACCUSED WAR CRIMINAL KARADZIC

REF: THE HAGUE 619

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Serbian security forces arrested Hague Tribunal indictee Radovan Karadzic late on July 21 in Belgrade, where he had reportedly been living under an assumed identity. The Serbian War Crimes court ruled the same night that he could be transferred to The Hague, a process that could take several days. Opposition political parties condemned and pro-European parties hailed the arrest, while public reaction has so far been minimal. Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic called the arrest a sign that Serbia was serious about European integration. The Foreign Ministry has also told us that it is only a matter of time before Ratko Mladic, one of the other two Hague indictees at large, is arrested. The arrest of Karadzic is an important step forward for the new Serbian government and an indication that it is capable of showing political courage. End Summary.

Karadzic at Serbian War Crimes Court

¶2. (U) Serbian security forces arrested Bosnian Serb wartime political leader and Hague Tribunal (ICTY) indictee Radovan Karadzic on July 21, according to a statement released by the Serbian National Security Council late that night. The statement further said the Special War Crimes Chamber of the Belgrade District Court held Karadzic and would be questioning him throughout the night. The Interior Ministry, now headed by Socialist leader Ivica Dacic, released a statement on July 21 saying its police did not take part in the arrest. On July 22, Dacic told the press that the arrest was the result of the work of the previous government.

¶3. (SBU) National Coordinator for ICTY Cooperation Rasim Ljajic and Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor Vladimir Vukcevic announced at an 11:00 press conference on July 22 that the investigative judge had held a hearing at which he served Karadzic ICTY's indictment and confirmed that all requirements under Serbian law for Karadzic's transfer to the Hague had been fulfilled. Karadzic now has three days to appeal the ruling, and a panel at the Special Court has a further three days to rule on the appeal. Belgrade ICTY Office head Deyan Mihov predicted to us that Karadzic would use his allotted three days to appeal, but the court would quickly approve the transfer; Karadzic could be sent to The Hague by the end of the week.

Extensive Surveillance Before Arrest

¶4. (SBU) Vukcevic told us privately the arrest came after a month of surveilling Karadzic's support network and that only three persons in the country knew about the operation in advance, including himself, new intelligence service (BIA) director Sasa Vukadinovic, and National Security Council secretary and presidential chief of staff Miodrag (Miki) Rakic. He confirmed that the Interior Ministry

was not involved. Foreign Affairs Ministry Political Director Borislav Stefanovic also confirmed this information to us on July 22, adding that Rakic deserved all the credit for making the arrest happen. He predicted that Mladic would be captured within months if not weeks, and said the "rumor" was that the third remaining indictee Goran Hadzic was in Russia.

15. (U) Ljajic and Vukcevic announced that Karadzic was arrested in a suburb of Belgrade, where he had been living under an assumed name and working at an alternative medicine clinic. They said that only Karadzic's supporters had known his identity, since his appearance had changed radically. (They released a photo now posted on B-92 http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=07&dd=22&nav_id=5210 9.) Karadzic's lawyer Svetozar Vujacic told the press a different version of events, claiming that his client was grabbed by unknown persons who threw a bag over his head on a Belgrade city bus on July 19 and held him "in a room somewhere" incommunicado for three days.

Political Party Reactions

16. (U) Reactions from the parties were swift. Serbian Radical Party (SRS) General Secretary Aleksandar Vucic on July 21 condemned the arrest and accused President Tadic of promoting Serbia's "disappearance." Acting SRS president Tomislav Nikolic added on July 22 that Karadzic was "a legend and a myth" rather than a war criminal, and that his party would do everything in its power to destroy the Tadic government. In a statement issued by party headquarters, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) distanced itself from the arrest and reiterated its opposition to the extradition of Serbian citizens to The Hague. Former PM Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) has been uncharacteristically

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silent, while their electoral list partner Velimir Ilic (New Serbia) questioned ICTY's fairness.

17. (SBU) Both the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and G-17 Plus hailed the arrest, with G-17 Plus calling it "proof that Serbia is oriented toward the future and prepared to face its past." Bosniak leaders in Serbia's Sandzak region welcomed the move; Party of Democratic Action (SDA) Vice President Semsudin Kucevic told us "We hoped this day would have come much sooner, but we are glad it is finally here."

Minimal Public Reaction

18. (U) Public reaction has been minimal so far. Early on July 22, police broke up a group of about a dozen youth in Republic Square wearing images of Karadzic and the symbol for ultra right wing group Obraz, protesting Karadzic's capture. Another similar group marched across from the Special Court, which is now being protected by a large group of gendarmerie. Another Obraz protest is scheduled for July 22 at 1700 local on Republic Square.

19. Police chief Milorad Veljovic contacted post late on July 21 to inform us that he had ordered heightened police protection for the U.S. and UK Embassies in anticipation of possible public reaction. "The Minister himself (Dacic) has ordered us to protect diplomatic establishments, especially the U.S. Embassy," he told us again on July 22.

Implications for EU Accession

110. (U) Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said in a statement on July 22 prior to a meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers in Brussels that the arrest was a sign that the new government took EU integration seriously. "We are truly dedicated to the peace and the rule of international law, both in regard to our cooperation with The Hague Tribunal and in regard to the defense of our sovereignty over Kosovo," Jeremic said.

111. (U) Local press are reporting EU foreign policy chief Javier

Solana's July 22 statement that ICTY Chief Serge Brammertz would almost certainly judge Serbia to be in full cooperation with the Hague (reftel). Belgrade ICTY head Mihov would not comment on Solana's statement but said the two had spoken. Brammertz was scheduled to visit Serbia July 23, but we have been informed that he postponed his visit due to Karadzic's arrest.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The arrest of one of ICTY's most sought-after war criminals is a major step forward in Serbia's cooperation with The Hague tribunal and toward European integration. The move required significant political resolve on the part of a government that is frequently paralyzed by the prospect of negative public backlash. Dacic's comments also indicate that the public rhetoric is being carefully calibrated to absolve the SPS of responsibility for the arrest. As some "talking heads" have already predicted that the timing of the arrest to coincide with the planned Brammertz visit and the EU Foreign Ministers' meeting will be seen cynically in Washington, it will be crucial for the United States to continue to emphasize the message of the July 21 White House statement that the move was an important demonstration of the Serbian Government's determination to honor its ICTY commitments. Such recognition will help encourage the new Serbian government to demonstrate similar political courage on the range of other tasks it now faces, from EU accession to Kosovo. As Charge told Stefanovic on July 22, "this is excellent news, but our bilateral agenda remains problematic." End Comment.

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